

The Context:



Ethnography and Ethnohistory of the Oroville Area

Ethnography

Maidu residents of the project area speak closely related dialects of the Konkow language, which is spoken throughout the Northwest Maidu or Konkow territory; it is a sister language to Maidu (Northeastern or Mountain Maidu) and to Nisenan (Southern Maidu). Together these three languages comprise the Maiduan Language Family. Konkow Peoples lived in village communities—a major village with a large, semi-subterranean assembly and ceremonial lodge owned by the chief provided the central ceremonial and political focus for several nearby affiliated villages.



Maidu Men Playing the Handgame in front of Bald Rock Roundhouse, 1907.

People had detailed and intimate knowledge about the distribution and usefulness of the plants in their territory. Families moved to strategic locations at appropriate harvest times to gather these desired foods, which included various greens, tubers and roots, seeds, nuts, and berries. Pine nuts from both sugar pine and foothill pine were highly valued, but the most important of these foods were acorns from the oak, particularly black oak. Acorns were gathered by the

Like other California Indian Peoples, the Konkow practiced a mixed gathering, fishing, and hunting economy. While it is often explained that California Indians were numerous because they had an abundance of foods, it is also the case that they managed their food resources skillfully and had food supplies available during non-harvest seasons. The Konkow



Bedrock Mortar where Maidu Women Pounded Acorn.

ton, dried and stored in granaries for winter use. Many other plant foods were also dried and stored for later use. The Konkow were able to provide themselves with ample food stores during seasons when fresh harvests were not available. It also allowed them to plan and provide for ceremonial meals to which families or settlements invited many others to partake of their generosity. Like other California Indian Peoples, the Konkow managed their environment by burning to enhance favorable ecozones and encourage harvests from desired plants. This practice discourages the growth of brush and supports the growth of grasses and other seed-producing plants, as well as oaks.

The Feather River offered a wealth of fish resources, particularly in the seasonal salmon runs, which provided a reliable and abundant source of food. Consultants recalled fishing in many locations along all branches and forks of the river, although Union Bar

on the Middle Fork was most frequently mentioned. Salmon were speared and could be eaten fresh, or dried and then pounded into a powder for storage. It could also be smoked. Many consultants reported that people turned to canning it in the early 20th Century. Konkow Maidu continue to take salmon from the river below the dam and still hold an annual salmon ceremony reflecting the importance of the salmon in Konkow life. Lamprey eel were also a favored food in early days. Only a few contemporary Konkow consultants remember this food with relish.

Hunting, too, provided an important source of food. Deer, which were plentiful in the foothills, were the main game animal; most often they were taken in large deer drives in which a number of men cooperated to run them over a cliff or into a runway where concealed hunters could shoot them. Other game mammals including elk, rabbits, squirrels, and birds such as quail, pigeons, ducks, and geese also contributed to the Konkow diet.

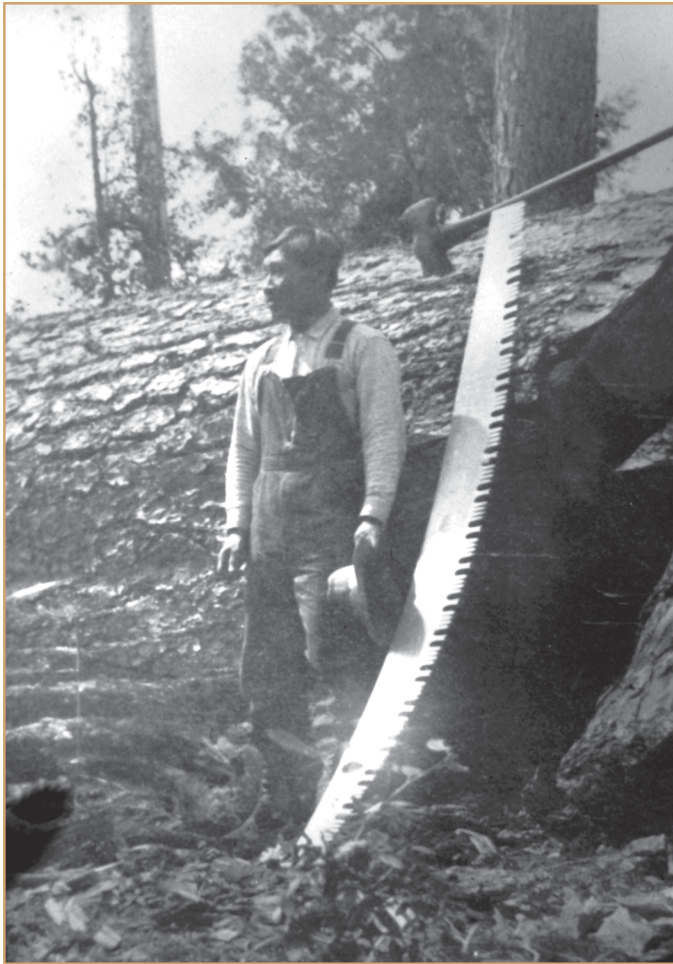
The Lake Oroville/Feather River area was particularly rich with a diverse range of natural resources which the Konkow Maidu managed and harvested with knowledge, skill, and care. Consequently, they lived densely in many communities throughout their territory, thriving as a People with a flourishing society and complex culture.

Ethnohistory

Life for California Indians changed drastically with colonization, which began with Spanish occupation of the coastal regions in 1769. There ensued for the Indian Peoples a long, bloody, punishing struggle with the colonists for the lands of California, a conflict which ultimately left their communities decimated from disease and mayhem, and their families displaced from their traditional homes. The Gold Rush in 1849 was particularly devastating for the Konkow Maidu Peoples. The Feather River and surrounding hills contained rich gold fields which enticed thousands of miners to the area. The miners brought many

diseases which were deadly to the Indian Peoples. They destroyed the landscape with their mining techniques and drove the Maidu off their lands in numerous violent encounters.

When the mining craze subsided, the miners settled in the area, turning large tracts of land to agricultural purposes—and this engendered new conflicts with the Maidu. Because of these conflicts, 18 treaties across California were negotiated by the federal government in 1851, with the Maidu receiving a substantial reservation that reached from Chico to Oroville. However, the Senate refused to ratify these treaties and the deadly conflicts continued. The Konkow Maidu were officially driven off their traditional lands—“removed”—twice; the first attempt occurred in 1853 when the Konkow, along with other tribes, were “rounded up” and sent to the



Maidu Logger, Swayne Lumber Co., 1921.